

Spaces and Identities in Border Regions

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Spaces and Identities in Border Regions: Politics – Media – Subjects

Christian Wille, Rachel Reckinger, Sonja Kmec, Markus Hesse (eds.)

Bielefeld: transcript, 2016

Border Studies is at risk of becoming a field of scholarship which is densely occupied but rarely endowed with bounteous insights or imagination. We appear to have responded to complex emerging challenges with a tendency towards disciplinary introspection and staid tradition. In this highly restrained and codified environment, intellectual endeavour and original contribution is marked, for the most part, by the creation of new verbs (several examples of which are provided in the extract below). We have substituted mindless word play for scholarly challenge. Whilst borders tighten across Europe and we witness the most significant rise of xenophobia for three generations, much of Border Studies is still pre-occupied with ever more obscurantist ways of describing the same processes – processes which are at risk of being relics of a happier era of pan-European cooperation.

Spaces and Identities in Border Regions offers the tantalising prospect of being something different. It examines three major loci of change: politics, media, and subjects (or ‘people’ to you and I) in Europe at a time when border management and border crossing are under major scrutiny and in great flux. The book is co-authored by some of the leading and upcoming academics in European Border Studies and much of what it presents is original research funded by the University of Luxembourg.

The potential for imagination and insights is, however, somewhat crushed by many of the familiar problems of Border Studies – obscurantist concepts and impenetrable prose are the main features of commonality across this wide range of chapters. Almost every time an author touches on a theme of likely relevance, the writing is frustratingly dense. For example, a concluding paragraph in the chapter on ‘space and identity constructions in everyday cultural practices’ reads as follows:

...investigations in ‘cross-border contexts’ exclude the supposition of fixed spatial entities, preset identities and subjects that derive their agency from social structures. Instead, the authors [in the preceding chapters] saw themselves (time and again) obliged to take a genuinely constructivist-relational perspective on their objects of research which in this chapter manifested itself primarily as a decentration [sic] of the subject. Here the empirical subject is effectively replaced by the concept of the subject as socially constituted and as constituting the social, in brief: the subject as an empirical [sic] project. This research perspective – translated to the analytical categories of subjectivation [sic] and subjectification [sic]– does not only tie in with the approaches of current cultural studies but is a precondition for adequately accessing subjects in the context of the border. (p.353)

The convoluted prose is such that, once having made the considerable effort necessary to unravel the meaning, the reader is more than likely to disagree with it. This is a book written as though its authors doubt very much that it will actually be read.

The book begins with a heavily laboured introduction, followed by a literature review (of the saintly cannon of dead white male professors: from de Certeau, to Lefebvre, to Soja...), all the while resting on Foucauldian neuroses (i.e. quirky references to power) as if they were illuminating. These are followed by a pseudo-methodological chapter in which the non-literal becomes pressed into meaningless diagrams, for no apparent reason. After this trying start, the reader is left to contend with a vast array of empirical topics.

The range of topics the book includes is very large and contains a most diverse and unexpected selection of case studies (from teenagers on Facebook, to art installations, to petrol stations and multilingual adverts). Among these, there is plenty to learn about, and from unexpected sources too. For example, you may take your pick from such chapters as a fascinating account of the architecture of a medieval European castle to an entertaining essay on the links between cross-border prostitution and national morality; “why do we not more often make use of the legal lever of deportation”, a député of the Luxembourg parliament enquired in 1904, “then many vendible harlots would have to leave the public houses and cross the border, taking much that is sordid with them” (p83). This theme of associating morality with the nation and immorality with ‘foreigners’ is one that speaks much to the experience today of the perception and treatment of immigrants.

That said, trying to find a gem or two applicable beyond the specific case of Luxembourg is as difficult and pointless as trying to identify how the stylised, high-fluting theoretical analysis relates in any real way to the empirical evidence uncovered. As stand alone pieces these essays would work fairly well, notwithstanding the slavish adherence to the somewhat convoluted theoretical framework imposed; it is unfortunate for the authors of these chapters that their contributions were combined into this book.

Interested parties (specifically those interested in Luxembourg, which is without doubt a fascinating country for revealing the dynamics and tensions of cross-border practices) would be best advised to look at the distinct work of the contributing authors rather than buying this book. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine whom this book might appeal to – sales will surely depend on the number of Foucauldian border scholars in Luxembourg and its immediate neighbours, or else those poor souls who buy a book on its title. Unfortunately, it will find few non-academics for whom a read of this book will prove either illuminating or useful.